

# Purity in Re-making: Sanskritisation of the Orientalists' Caste among Low Caste Villagers in West Bengal, India

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## Abstract

This paper seeks to demonstrate how the Oriental construction of India has been remade, rather than challenged by the lower caste and class groups who are often excluded from the Orientalists' depiction. Many scholars who employ post-colonial view argue that the Orientalists' attempt to unify Indian culture, though diverse in nature, into a monolithic culture provides an unrealistic portrayal of India. One of the products of this portrayal is the depiction of 'India' as a caste-based society and caste becomes a fundamental symbol for India. Louis Dumont (1911-1998), a French anthropologist, claimed that Indian caste is fundamentally hierarchical and it is guided by the notion of purity and pollution. His view on Hindu caste has been heavily criticised. Later scholars disagreed with him arguing

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that there are many factors that form the Hindu caste system and Dumont's view on caste is not based on reality of India. Drawing on the process of Sanskritisation, which demonstrates how dominant values and culture are reproduced by the lower caste and class groups in order to uplift their social status, this paper argues that Dumont's notion of Hindu caste and therefore the Oriental tropes are not always invalid. In fact, the Oriental construction of India has been remade, even if in an incomplete form, among the lower caste villagers who are not included in the Oriental depiction. Therefore, a well-grounded ethnographic study on purity and pollution practiced among lower caste villagers in West Bengal, India, will be used to demonstrate that the social value prescribed for the high caste are also practiced among the lower caste and class people. This consequently suggests that the Oriental portrayal of Hindu caste is not merely an imagination of the West. Instead, it relates to the reality of Hindu lives in rural villages. The process of Sanskritisation also entails that the Dalit and lower caste groups's reaction to the upper caste hegemony is not only done in the form of resistance but also acceptance.

**Keywords:** Orientalist, Sanskritisation, Hindu caste, Purity, West Bengal

**วิถีชนชั้น ความบริสุทธิ์ และการผลิตซ้ำ  
กรณีศึกษาวิถีชนชั้นตามแบบตะวันออกนิยมของคนชนชั้นล่าง  
ในชนบทรัฐเบงกอล ตะวันตกของประเทศไทย**

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## บทคัดย่อ

บทความวิชาการฉบับนี้มุ่งศึกษาการผลิตซ้ำ ‘ความเป็นอินเดีย’ ที่ถูกสร้างขึ้นโดยนักตะวันออกนิยม ที่มองอินเดียผ่านมุมมองที่ผิดเพี้ยนจากความเป็นจริง โดยการผลิตซ้ำนี้กระทำโดยชนชั้นล่างผู้ไม่ถูกนับรวมเข้าไปในความเป็นอินเดีย ดังกล่าว นักวิชาการสายหลังอาณานิคมเสนอว่าความพยายามของนักตะวันออกนิยมที่จะทำให้ประเทศที่มีความหลากหลายทางสังคมและวัฒนธรรมอย่างอินเดียเป็นสังคมเอกภาพนั้น ถือเป็นการบิดเบือนความจริง ผลผลิตของการสร้างอินเดียแบบตะวันออกนิยมที่เห็นได้อย่างชัดเจนคือการมองอินเดียว่าเป็นสังคมแห่งชนชั้น

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หลุยส์ ดุมองต์ (1911-1998) นักมานุษยวิทยาชาวฝรั่งเศสเสนอว่า ชนชั้นที่ปรากฏในสังคมอินเดียมีรากฐานมาจากความเชื่อเรื่องความบริสุทธิ์และความไม่บริสุทธิ์ของชาติกำเนิด ทั้งนี้แนวคิดเรื่องความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างชนชั้นและความบริสุทธิ์ของดุมองต์ถูกวิพากษ์วิจารณ์อย่างหนัก นักวิชาการรุ่นหลังมองว่าระบบชนชั้นที่ปรากฏในสังคมอินเดียไม่ได้มีรากฐานมาจากความเชื่อเรื่องความบริสุทธิ์ของชาติกำเนิดเท่านั้น แต่มีมาจากหลายปัจจัย อาทิ ปัจจัยทางเศรษฐกิจและสังคม อย่างไรก็ตาม บทความฉบับนี้เสนอว่า แม้ความเป็นสังคมชนชั้นที่มีรากฐานมาจากชาติกำเนิดของบุคคลจะเป็นภาพที่ถูกสร้างขึ้นด้วยความเข้าใจอินเดียเพียงบางส่วนของคนนอกอย่างนักตะวันออกนิยม ภาพความเป็นอินเดียเช่นนี้ก็กลับถูกผลิตซ้ำในสังคมและชนชั้นระดับล่าง ผ่านกระบวนการทางสังคมที่เรียกว่า ‘การทำให้เป็นเช่นคนชนชั้นสูง หรือ Sanskritisation’ ทั้งนี้การผลิตซ้ำนี้มีเป้าหมายเพื่อยกระดับทางสังคมของชนชั้นล่าง บนฐานคิดที่ว่าหากได้ดำรงชีวิตตามแบบคนชั้นสูงแล้วพวกเขาจะสามารถยกระดับชาติกำเนิดของตนได้ บทความนี้เป็นการศึกษาเชิงชาติพันธุ์เกี่ยวกับการปฏิบัติเพื่อดำรงความบริสุทธิ์ในแบบวิถีคนชนชั้นสูงของชนชั้นล่างที่อาศัยในชนบท เขตเบงกอลตะวันตก ของประเทศอินเดีย โดยผลของการศึกษานี้ชี้ให้เห็นว่าคุณค่าทางสังคมที่ถือปฏิบัติและจำกัดในวงชนชั้นสูง และภาพความเป็นอินเดียที่ถูกสร้างขึ้นโดยนักตะวันออกนิยม มิได้เป็นเพียงจินตนาการที่บูดเบี้ยวแต่เป็นความจริงที่ปรากฏโดยทั่วไปในสังคมระดับล่างของอินเดีย

**คำสำคัญ:** ตะวันออกนิยม, การทำให้เป็นเช่นคนชนชั้นสูง (พราหมณ์), ชนชั้น  
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## Introduction

Caste defines the core of Indian tradition, and it is seen today as the major threat to Indian modernity. If we are to understand India properly, and by implication if we are to understand India's other core symbol—Hinduism—we must understand caste, whether we admire or revile it.

Nicolas Dirks (2001, p. 3)

When we think about India, we often think about caste and when we think about caste we are likely to end up thinking of the two opposed groups, Brahman on the one hand and Dalit on the other.<sup>3</sup> While the former seems to gain the most privilege in society, the latter lives in the other side of the pole and is often marginalised and looked down as if they were human of different species. Caste (*jati*) is perceived as the fundamental form of India society, at times is a marker for India being backward society. Many outsiders and perhaps insiders take the view that Indian caste represents social inequality and suppression. As we shall see that there were many movements arisen to challenge, or even aim to change, India caste-based social structure, for example the Dalit Buddhist movement led by Dr. Ambedkar Nagar and beef-eating movement found in West Bengal and many parts of Southern India. Different form of protests, particularly done by the Dalit caste groups entails the challenge and resistance against the high caste hegemony (Sathyamala, 2019, p. 878).

Indeed, the discussion on Hindu caste has been prevailing for centuries, especially during the colonial period (1858-1981) when British rulers tried to control India using not only better and superior military organisation, but also the cultural technologies of rule (Dirks, 2001, p. 9). Caste was one of the cultural

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<sup>3</sup> Formally known as 'Untouchable'. The term was assigned by British Raj to refer to depressed classes.

projects of British Colonialists to reshape India in the form that they wanted ‘India’ to be perceived. It is the British rulers who tried to systematise India castes and made the gap between upper caste and lower caste wider. In fact, India as we know today is diverse and, explicitly and implicitly the result of the resistance as well as acceptance of British colonialism. <sup>4</sup> According to Mines and Lamb (2010), *jati* means more than one thing and it does not necessarily have the same meaning as the term *varṇa*, which literally means order, colour or class. While there are four *varṇa* namely *Brahman* (scholars), *Ksatriya* (Kings), *Vaishya* (merchants or farmers) and *Sudras* (servants), there are thousands of castes existing in Hindu society. Caste, sometimes called sub-caste, or *jati* in its vernacular term, refers to what a person was born into (O’Connell, 1982). However, one may be born into a leatherwork or farming caste, they are not required to work as leatherworkers or farmers respectively, though some may do. Caste names do not always identify people’s occupation. In addition, caste (*jati*) are endogamous. People incline to avoid inter-caste marriage (Mines & Lamb, 2010, p. 146). However, saying that human *jati* are endogamous does not always imply that there will be no inter-caste marriage in Hindu society. In fact, cross-caste marriage is often practised, at least in Birbhum district of West Bengal where an ethnographic data for this paper was conducted.

Louis Dumont’s work on Hindu caste perhaps had the most impact as well as criticism during his time and later. He posited that the Hindu caste system was fundamentally hierarchical and encompassed by the notion of ritual purity and pollution (Dumont, 1970). According to his view, a person who is pure is placed in the high ranks and the less pure or more impure are placed in the lower ranks. That being said, those who are Brahmins and are pure vegetarians are ranked above agrarians, who are involved with life and death practices when tilling soil. Agrarians, in turn, ranked above washermen whose work is to wash soiled and bloodied clothes, as well as barber who shaved corpses’ hair. Washermen and barbers, in

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<sup>4</sup> Colonialism was all about knowledge and was itself “cultural project of control”. See more (Dirks, 2001).

turn, rank higher than leatherworkers who produced goods from dead animals (Mines & Lamb, 2010, p. 147). Scholars argued that Dumont's interpretation of Hindu caste was narrow and influenced by theory of *varṇa* in *Dharmaśāstras* (Carman, Marglin, 1985). It represented the Oriental interpretation of India which often described the whole 'India' in terms of caste. Nonetheless, his pioneering research encouraged other scholars to explore and investigate the Hindu castes from various perspectives and contexts.

Dumont's organising principle of caste —pure and impure— was criticised as solely being from a religious perspective. Pure and impure are categories that are derived from priestly practices and Brahmanical texts (Ibid., p. 147).<sup>5</sup> Later scholars, employing ethnographic studies in rural India, argued that Hindu caste was diverse and not only encompassed by religious categories or not necessary to be hierarchical. Gloria Raheja (1988), for example, proposed that there were three aspects of inter-caste relations: mutuality, centrality and hierarchy. Caste from the perspective of hierarchy was used in terms of vertical relationship and was associated to purity and pollution, to which the Brahmin was placed in the higher rank. However, castes in the aspects of mutuality (reciprocal or balance exchange) and centrality (landowners are the centre of distribution network) are not practised in vertical hierarchy. Caste involved not only religious perspective but also social and economic perspectives (See also Mines & Lamb, 2010, p.147-148). That is, the dominant caste in the distribution network is not always Brahman.

Dumont's interpretation of Hindu caste reflects Oriental tropes of India. He understood Hindu caste from the Western and Brahmanical (elite) view point, which was challenged by the postcolonial scholars claiming that it did not reveal the complete reality of Hindu caste and India culture. It needs to be noted that the knowledge constructed by the Orientalists as well as Colonialists was criticised by

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<sup>5</sup> To this point, Patrick Olivelle (2011) argues that Dumont's priestly ideal of pure and impure did not derive from Brahmanical Hindu texts.

Postcolonial scholars, arguing that the Oriental depiction of India was not based on context and local reality but an imagination of the West towards the East (Said, 2003). Therefore, render the process of Sanskritisation, this paper seeks to demonstrate how the dominant values prescribed for the upper castes are reproduced among the lower castes in the rural villages of West Bengal. I argue that Dumont's Oriental depiction of Hindu caste as a hierarchical and vertical order encompassed by the ideal of purity and pollution is not only restricted to the upper caste, but it is also replicated by low caste villagers in order to uplift their social status. Accordingly, Hindu castes from the perspective of the Orientalists is not always invalid. Local reaction to the aforementioned depiction is not only in the language of resistance but also of acceptance. That said, to some extent, the lower caste groups also agree with the way the upper caste used for marginalising them.

In order to demonstrate how the Oriental depiction of Hindu caste is adopted by the lower caste villagers who are often excluded from such representation, I will first explore the process of Sanskritisation and the understanding of Brahmanical practices of purity and pollution in relation to caste hierarchy. I then will illustrate the practice of purity and pollution among the low caste villagers in order to discuss how the process of Sanskritisation validates Dumont's Oriental perception of Hindu caste. In addition, to understand the rural mode of living, the village lifestyle in West Bengal where my ethnographic research was conducted will also be provided.

## **Methodology**

The data for this paper was collected while I was conducting ethnographic fieldwork for my PhD research in 2016 to 2018, in the area near Santiniketan; Birbhum and Bardhaman District of West Bengal, India. Although my PhD research focuses on the life of female renunciators (*sadhuma*) in the Vaishnava Sahajiya tradition, living among Sahajiya sadhus also allowed me to spend time with householder communities located near the ashrams. Some families acted as my host family where I usually spent longer periods of time with them before moving to

stay at the ashrams or my own accommodation in Santiniketan. Participant observation (living and closely participating and observing informants' life for a certain period of time) was the key method for this research. In this study, spontaneous conversation, rather than interview, is the most effective mean to elicit informants' life story and their personal opinion. Like many other anthropologists, knowing some local language and culture of the informants beforehand are what I had been preparing before conducting fieldwork and this seems to be the fast track for researchers to get into the community and building up a good rapport with informants.

### **Sanskritisation and Hindu Caste Purity**

Sanskritisation was first introduced by S.N. Srinivas, a social anthropologist whose study focused on dominant castes in South India. In *Religion and society among the Coorgs of South India*, he provided that Sanskritisation is the process by which the lower caste or tribal people adopt the higher castes' customs, rituals, and way of life in order to uplift their social status (Srinivas, 1952).

The caste system is far from a rigid system in which the position of each component caste is fixed for all time. Movement has always been possible, and especially in the *middle regions of the hierarchy*. A caste was able, in a generation or two, to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by Sanskritising its ritual and pantheon. In short, it took over, as far as possible, the customs, rites, and beliefs of the Brahmins, and adoption of the Brahmanic way of life by a low caste seems to have been frequent, though theoretically forbidden. This process has been called 'Sanskritisation' in this book, in preference to 'Brahminisation', as certain Vedic rites are confined to the Brahmins and the two other 'twice-born' castes.

(Ibid., p. 32)

Vegetarianism was the Brahmanical custom that lower caste people adopted to claim their higher rank. It was done especially by those who are in the middle of caste hierarchy. As a result, Srinivas argued that Hindu caste hierarchy is not at all static, instead it is dynamic and a person can gradually change his rank by following the Brahmanical way of life, as well as values that prescribed in Sanskrit texts (Srinivas, 1952, p. 48). To Hindus, being vegetarian infers that a person can maintain or even enhance their purity by not being in contact with the death pollution of any dead animal. In addition, vegetarianism marks persons' upper caste identity and their moral superior (Sathyamala, 2019, p. 878). In contrast, non-vegetarians are in contact to the pollution of dead animals that they have in their meal, accordingly non-vegetarians are considered to be impure. As a result, vegetarians tend to be more pure than non-vegetarians. The vegetarian diet was originally prescribed for only Brahmins in order to maintain their degree of purity and thus maintaining in higher rank. In this context, enhancing a degree of purity and so a person's rank through vegetarianism suggests the relationship between hierarchy and a degree of purity. It appears that the degree of purity tends to encompass one's social hierarchy.

Purity and impurity caught scholars' attention when Dumont (1970) argued that purity is the organising principle of the Hindu caste system. The caste hierarchy has been allocated according to the gradation of purity. He observes that the high caste is seen to contain a higher degree of purity. However, such purity seems to be fluid and vulnerable. Their purity can be contaminated easily by contacting to the pollution especially of the lower castes. On the contrary, the impurity of the lower castes is seen as more solid, and once a person is born into a lower caste, s/he seems to stay impure permanently. Dumont's observation on Hindu caste suggests the solid and vertical hierarchy of pure-impure dichotomy. This means a person who is affiliated to the higher caste is essentially pure. On the other hand, a lower caste is essentially impure.

Scholars such as T.N. Madan (1971), Dirks (2001), McKim Marriot (1969), criticised Dumont's viewpoint as not valid in every context, particularly where

the power relation was not always fixed in vertical hierarchy. To them, Dumont tends to represent the Oriental tropes which often depict India from Western, yet unrealistic perspective. Madan (1971) proffered that Dumont's finding was not based on ethnographic data and thus not been practised in the real context. Dirks (1990) argued that purity and pollution did not necessarily associate to hierarchy. He added "purity and pollution are not primary relational coordinates which endow hierarchy with its meaning and substance" (61). The study of food transaction of Marriot (cited from Lamb, 2002) provided that inter-caste transaction create the horizontal dimension of 'mixing' rather than vertical hierarchy. In addition, the study of Jonathan Parry (1994) in Banaras confirmed that the transaction of gifts and their affiliated impurity was not always in a fixed and vertical direction. Gifts given to the priests are embeded with misfortunes, grieves, illness, and even the death of the donors. Accordingly, keeping the gift with oneself means keeping all misfortunes and sin within. Consequently, to avoid these misfortunes, the priests need to give away the gifts or perform some austerities which would make them less vulnerable to the bad energy conveyed through the gift.

On the contrary, Marglin (1985), in support of Dumont, took the view that there was a relationship between some form of purity and hierarchy, in which the purer ranks above the less pure. In my study in consensus with Dumont and Marglin, I argue that to some extent there is a connection between purity and hierarchy which can be found among the lower caste villagers in West Bengal. The degree of purity that the villagers accomplish through following the Brahmanical food custom encompasses their rank in the community. In addition, it seems to me that people who can maintain higher degrees of purity, even if they are not from the higher castes, are ranked more favourably and seems to have better economic status than their neighbours. This suggests that the family economics is one of factors that make their members able to follow the Brahmanical values, increase their degree of purity, and thus upgrade their social hierarchy.

Purity most concerned by Hindu India is bodily purity, in which food seem to be an effective medium transferring impurity of one to another. There are two opposing views towards the body, one put forward by a householder and another

by a renouncer (Olivelle, 1992). According to the renunciators' viewpoint, body is always impure and a source of worldly attachment. In contrast, the profane world claims that the body, particularly of the twice born Brahmin, is pure or can be made pure after undergoing a certain ritual. There are certain bodily fluids such as semen, menstrual blood, saliva, urine, feces, and etc., which are impure and a person who is in contact with these fluids, particularly of the lower caste, is in need of purification. To maintain bodily purity, the higher caste will avoid being in contact with the lower caste, especially their bodily fluids. However, if the higher castes accidentally contact to the lower caste's bodily fluids, they need to purify themselves to regain their state of purity. Water and cow dung are the most common substances for purification. Undergoing particular rituals, such as bathing every morning, or after having had contact with an impure substance seem to be the common practice of the higher caste in order to maintain or regain their state of purity. In the case that the high caste unavoidably contacts to the lower caste, they may sip some water before touching things or receiving services provided by the low caste people (Douglas, 1966).

The following section will demonstrate how lower caste villagers replicate the normative Hindu diet in order to enhance their purity and social status. Indeed, the villagers would not be able to change their caste at least within generation but the Brahmanical lifestyle they uphold, to a degree, brings them higher degree of purity and seemingly Brahmanical pride. That said, being able to eat like Brahmins, or being complete vegetarians, help uplifting the villagers' social status, especially low caste people who are economically comfortable.

## **The practice of purity and pollution among low caste villagers**

### **Lives in the rural village**

It is worth noting that documenting participants' caste origin, especially of the lower caste, is not straightforward. Many lower caste people are likely to hide their caste origin and try to prove that, similar to those of the higher caste, they

also observe Brahmanical code of conduct in regard to purity and pollution. Most of the villagers I worked with were caste *Manisha* and *Ba-ngal*. They were farmer and people who emigrated from East Bengal (Bangladesh), respectively. While Manishas have relatively higher status, Ba-ngals are ranked lower and their caste contains a sense of otherness. Ba-gnals are often marginalised and discriminated by local Bengali. Accordingly, many Ba-ngals took initiation into the *Baishnab* caste in order to upgrade their status.

In villages of Birbhum and Bardhaman district, there was little variation in terms of occupations and lifestyles. Although participants were from different villages, they were all farmers and had lower caste origin. Their houses were built in a traditional style, using mud and thatch. The well-off families may build their house with tin roof and bricks. People regularly painted them with cow dung mixed with mud. Only a few families were Brahman and they seemed to be the wealthiest in the village. They were engaged in working for the national train company or school. They had higher education and some of them were landowners.



### ***Figure 1 Mud House***

Most of the villagers were busy throughout the year, especially during the harvest season. From November to December, they harvested the rice then grew potatoes. They also grew mustard from December to January and harvested it in February. Some villagers who had land with a good irrigation system planted rice a second time in March, which was harvested four to five months later. In the dry season, most villagers could take a rest and prepare seeds for the next season. Depending on market prices, the income from selling their agricultural products was not stable. In 2017, for example, although a family grew many potatoes could only earn about 700–1,000 Indian Rupees (10-14 USD). All of the family members regardless of gender contributed their labour to the farm, women also have to take full responsibility for the household chores.

#### **Vernacular Practice of Purity and Pollution**

The vernacular practice in regard to purity and pollution demonstrated in this section is of food purity. Food seems to be a concrete medium that can demonstrate a person's purity custom. At time, food hierarchy is seen as a function of caste structure and the purity of food identifies one's identity (Sathyamala, 2019). According to Joseph Alter (1997) and Parry (1986), what to eat and how to eat tend to determine a person's quality. Food intake explicitly affects the quality of a person's bodily fluids. Parry suggests that a person is likely to contain qualities of the food that one eats. Eating hot food is seen to produce heat in the body and to provoke passion and lust. On the other hand, eating cold food reduces the temperature in the body, making it cool and calm (Parry, 1986, p. 613).

Not only does the quality inherent to each ingredient affect the body, but when ingredients are cooked, the quality of the cook is also transmitted to food and thus the person who eats the food. That is, cooked food is strongly affected by the quality of the cook (Ibid.). If the cook is impure, that impurity can also contaminate the person who eats that food. Moreover, eating itself is a risky process that can make a person impure, since it involves saliva, which is regarded to

be an impure substance by Bengalis (Lamb, 2000). The food process is indeed a source that can threaten anyone's purity and so status. As a result, a person in a higher state of purity will avoid eating food cooked by someone from the lower castes. In Bengali culture, boiled rice is the most vulnerable food as it can be easily contaminated (Ibid.). It has been asserted that to avoid pollution from the lower castes and to be able to live in a modern lifestyle, the Brahmins will accept any food cooked by other castes but not the boiled rice.

It needs to be noted that Bengali culture, claimed by the Bengalis and Bengali scholars whom I had personal conversations with, is the most flexible culture in comparison to other cultures in India. The Bengali code of conduct such as food purity and caste hierarchy are far more relax than other Brahmins from other regions. Originally, Bengal had no Brahmin before the Sena Dynasty. The Sena rulers invited Brahmins such as Mukherjees from other regions to marry with local Bengali women.<sup>6</sup> Practically speaking, Bengali Brahmins do not follow the complete vegetarian practice prescribed for Brahman owing to the fact that they eat fish rather than being pure vegetarians. Not being pure vegetarians seems to be a source of discrimination toward Bengali Brahmins. My professor in India told me her story about caste discrimination towards Bengali Brahmins. She was originally from a strict vegetarian Brahmin family in Rajasthan. When she decided to marry a Bengali Brahmin who was also a professor, her family disapproved, claiming the Bengali Brahmins were not real Brahmins due to their (fish) eating customs. In addition to this story, many Bengali Brahmin families in the villages also eat chicken and eggs, noting that although they are Brahmins, they also live in poverty like their lower caste neighbours. Nonetheless, the pride of being Brahmins is there; it appears that eating food cooked by a lower caste, or being in

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<sup>6</sup> Mukherjees or Mukhopadhays, Banerjees, Chatterjees, Bhattacharjees, and Gangulys were said to be invited to settle down in Southern Bengal during the Sena Dynasty. They were originally from Gangetic plain in Northern India. See more (Wikipedia, Sena Dynasty, 2020)

contact with the pollution of the lower caste, is still strictly avoided by the Brahmins in villages.

Consequently, it seems that the context of re-making Brahmanical purity through food custom among the lower caste villagers in West Bengal appears to be influenced by both Bengali vegetarianism and the ideal Brahmanical vegetarianism as we could see in the Hindu texts such as the Laws of Manu. Indeed, the extent to which lower caste re-makes the Brahmins's way of life is often done in an incomplete form, in which the villagers' socio-economic reality seems to be one of the key factors that reshapes Brahmanical values into a form that is affordable and suitable for them. Families that are economically comfortable appear to be able to re-make the Brahminical life style in a more complete form. In contrast, families that are in severe poverty embrace only some Brahmanical practices that they can afford. There are two perspectives of food purity –what to eat and how to eat– which I will discuss in the following section to demonstrate how the lower caste villagers re-make a Brahmanical life model, or in the other words, how the villagers are Sanskritised.

### ***What to eat: Occasional Vegetarians***

I was told by the Brahmin families that an ideal Brahmins should take only the satvic diet such as fresh fruits and vegetables (in exclusion of garlic and onion). It worth noting that satvic diet promotes the quality of *sattva*, which is defined as quality of goodness and purity.<sup>7</sup> The diet is composed of ingredients as well as cooking methods that promote balance, harmony, and purity in eaters. Some Vegetarians associate their vegetarianism with the yogic diet. Urmali Desai, a modern yogi defined satvic food as “food that is vegetarian, fresh, cooked in an appropriate manner, and not overly spiced or oily” (1995, p. iv). Indeed, being a pure vege-

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<sup>7</sup> A person is believed to have three qualities naming *sattva* (pure, harmony), *tamas* (darkness, inertia) and *rajas* (action, energy passion). See (Jacob, 2019)

tarian is prescribed for only Brahmins. However, it appears that people from the lower caste tend to follow this practice although in most cases I encountered, it was practiced temporally. They become pure vegetarians only on some days. Villagers are inclined to be non-vegetarian due to their economic status and their hard work on the farm which mainly involves physical work. Accordingly, being strict vegetarians would give them less energy and so work less efficiently. However, due to their financial situation, having meat in their meal seems to be limited. The villagers usually have meat during special occasions or when they have special guests pay a visit. Nonetheless, they have fish in their meal more often since they could get it for free, which either caught it in their local pond or river.

It seems that villagers did not have any solid restriction in terms of what to eat. The most of their meals are solely made from vegetables. However, they are not pure vegetarian because they also cooked some hot ingredients in their food. Hot ingredients such as onion and garlic which are avoided by the pure vegetarians and seasonal vegetables are consumed on daily basis. Of course, those who are Hindus are not to eat beef but mainly fish, chicken and mutton. They also have cow milk and eggs in their meal. Villagers committed themselves to be pure vegetarians only temporally. They took pure vegetarian food occasionally, especially during the important religious festivals such as *Saraswati puja* and *Durga puja*. They viewed that this practice, even for only a short period of time, elevated their purity and made them better than the others in the villages who did not follow this vegetarian practice.

It appears that those who were more enthusiastic to elevate their purity by being strict vegetarian were the lower castes who had higher education and financially comfort. They not only took pure vegetarian meals more often than the poorer ones, but also managed their facilities to meet the high caste standards. I was staying with a family who had their own business in Bolpur town. Two daughters from the family had graduated and were married to a well off family nearby. The family had a huge comfortable brick house. Their kitchen caught my attention from the fact that the cooking areas for vegetarian food and non-vegetarian food were separated and so gas stoves and cooking utensils were also in sepa-

rate sets. In addition, there was a hand washing basin installed in between the two sections. When the cooks moved from non-vegetarian section to the vegetarian section, they had to (symbolically) wash or rinse their hands with water. However, they did not need to do so when moved from one vegetarian section to another. In addition, the utensils used to serve vegetarian meal also needed to be washed in separate washing area. The separation of the vegetarian and non-vegetarian was operated to preserve the purity of the food and so the eaters. Indeed, this practice could not be done by all lower caste villagers due to their financial limitations, however, many of them tried to follow this practice as far as their life condition allowed. Being able to follow Brahmanical vegetarianism though temporally implicitly indicates their economic advantage. It infers that a family has better mode and means to assist them in achieving an ideal way of life.

It seems to me that the socio-economic context in the villages allows the villagers to be only occasional vegetarians. Of course, having only vegetable is more economical than having meat and it seems more suitable to their economic level. However, their way of life and disadvantage background suggest that perhaps having every food that available is the best way they can survive. I was not certain as to why villagers, especially who did not need to do physical work, did not commit themselves to be full-time vegetarians. When I had a conversation with them, they simply told that they did not want to do so and therefore only being occasional vegetarians was good enough for them. Some of them said, as Bengali eating fish was crucial. It determines how to be a real Bengali.

### ***How to eat: Cooking and Eating Process***

Although villagers do not have many choices on what to eat due to their poverty and they seem to be less enthusiastic about being vegetarian permanently, they appear to put their best effort to maintain the purity of the cooking process. Focusing on eating process rather than what to eat seems to be coherent to their life reality. The Brahmanical eating manner that they follow will demonstrate to the public that they have similar eating custom like Brahmins. This also infers that their purity is maintained because their bodily fluids are not mixed with the fluids

of the others outside their clan. It seems to me that some villagers were strict on their code of conduct of purity when they were with me and guests, rather than among their family members. This implicitly showed that to some villagers (at least those whom I worked with) being pure is less likely to be about developing one's inner quality. It is rather associated to uplifting one's public figure.

Another family I had been living with was a Baul family who converted to the *Baishnab* caste.<sup>8</sup> Their neighbour told me that they were from a very lower caste, presumably leatherwork, but the whole family took initiation into Baishnab and always regarded themselves as Baishnab. The family earned an income from singing Baul songs (Bengali folk songs) and it appeared that all male members in the family were talented musicians. Some of them performed in many concerts abroad, which indicated their stable economic status. Visitors from both local and abroad always paid a visit to the family, to which the hospitality from the host was highly required. Lipi, in her fifties, was the only lady in the family and she was the only one in charge for every household chore. She cooked every meal for every one and she always made sure that her food contained no pollution, meaning that it was cooked by the high castes and came in contact with no bodily fluids of the cooks. Every guest who entered the house was required to wash their hands and feet with the provided water at the entrance. In addition, a person who used the toilet for defecation needed to change into new clothes because the old clothes were impure from contacting faeces.<sup>9</sup> Failing to do so, they would not be allowed to enter to the kitchen area or in worse case they would not be able to eat at the same area with others who could maintain their purity.

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<sup>8</sup> *Baishnab* or Vaishnava is an open caste. A person can be born into or be recruited to become *Baishnab*. That is anyone can become *Baishnab*. The caste is relatively high since Brahmins can accept water from Baishnab. See more Jeanne Openshaw, Home or Ashram? The Vaishnavas of Bengal (Openshaw, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Most households have toilet only for defecating. If they want to urinate, they either go outside or use bathing room.

The cooking process observed by Lipi involved maintaining food purity. Although any one could prepare the cooking ingredients for her such as washing and cutting vegetables, not everyone could cook or even enter to the cooking area. The restriction is similar to that of the Brahmins who can only eat food cooked by Brahmins, and so only Baishnab and a higher caste can cook for Lipi's family members. While cooking, it was important that the cook did not eat or drink any food in the cooking area for fear that the food may be contaminated with cook's saliva. There was a time when Lipi saw me drinking water while putting the wood into the fire pit where vegetables were cooking. She disapproved my action, telling that the vegetable would not be able to be consumed because it now was impure (ashudha). I apologised and tried to convince her that the food was certainly not in contact with my saliva. She explained that although my saliva did not directly touch the food, my hand directly touched the saliva, then touched the wood which used for cooking vegetable. Accordingly, the food was indirectly contagious with my saliva. It seems to me that in her view there was always the spread of saliva when eating regardless of how and what to eat.

Not only did the cook need to abstain from eating and drinking while cooking, the food server also needed to do so. That is, when serving food the server should only serve and once everyone finished their meal, the server could start her meal. The reason why the server was not allowed to eat while serving food was on the account of saliva contamination. Serving while eating made the food impure and consequently the eater also became impure. It needs to be noted that the server needed to be one of family members rather than visitors or helpers. I usually was not allowed to serve food because Lipi was not certain about my purity as well as caste origin. I told her that there was no caste system in Thailand and as a result I had no caste. However, with my behaviour of using the toilet to urinate rather than doing it outside as well as not taking a bath or changing my clothes after using the toilet, she thought that I was always filthy and therefore impure. In addition, she would not allow her helper to be close to the kitchen and deliver the food since the quality of the helper who was from the lower caste would contaminate the food. Accordingly, my duties at the house, like the helper, were to prepare

and wash vegetables, clean up the eating area and wash the utensils.

According to the villagers, the left hand is not allowed to be used at all while eating. They reasoned that left hand was used to clean the bottom after defecating, which was considered to be highly polluted. Left hand pollution appears to last permanently because, habitually and culturally, local people always clean themselves after toileting with the left hand. In addition, the left hand is not only related to the pollution caused by faeces, but the left side is also associated to death and inauspiciousness. Accordingly, for the reason of auspiciousness (*mongkal*) and purity (*suddha*), the code of conduct in regard to the right hand and the right side are to be observed strictly by villagers.<sup>10</sup>

Outsiders are perhaps familiar with an understanding that women during her menstrual period are to live in seclusion and not allowed to perform any ritual and any household chores. This depiction of women can be seen in The Laws of Manu and indeed it has been practising by many women especially from high caste and class families.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to the aforementioned depiction, women in the context that I worked with, still need to maintain their household chores and contribute their labour to the family during their menstrual period. They live their lives as usual; cooking and cleaning for the family members, traveling to work on their farm, or working as day labourers at the construction site or farm. However, they have to restrain from any religious activities such as worshipping gods or ancestors (*puja*) and visiting the temples (*mandir*). When I was staying at Santiniketan, I had Shonar, a single lady in her twenties who came to clean my accommodation once or twice a week. Usually after cleaning my house, Shonar would go back to her

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<sup>10</sup> Young children (including me as a foreigner) have been trained to use only their right hand when eating by sitting on the left hand during the meal and gradually using only right hand becomes their habit.

<sup>11</sup> The Laws of Manu is said to be the text that prescribed by and for the elite. See more (Gross, 2009; Sugirtharajah, 2002)

house to help her sister in law with the chores and then go to work at the farm. One day she asked me if I had the sanitary pad for her, indicating that she was having her period.<sup>12</sup> I was surprised and asked if she needed to stay in seclusion and take the rest like Gayatri, the actress in *Padman* (Bollywood film). She said there was no such a thing like that in the village and menstruating women had to do everything except *puja*. “What are we going to eat if women during her menstrual cycle do not work”, she added. This is because most families earn their income from farming and all members regardless of gender are important for the household economics. That being said, although women are impure while menstruating and their impurity can literally be transmitted through food they cook, villagers seem to ignore this impurity. Instead, they follow their reality.

I often visited Shonar’s family which was tribal family when I was free from fieldwork. There were 9 members in the family and most of them were women except the father and her brother. There were two girls including Shonar waiting to be married off but the family did not have enough dowry, so the marriage needed to be postponed. Although, their living standard was quite low, they would try their best to show that they followed the Brahmanical practice of purity. The cooking area located on the ground was clean and all utensils were neatly kept. The cook who was her sister in law would not eat or go to the toilet while cooking. She waited until she finished cooking, then went to the toilet, took a bath in the pond and got changed into a new sari. After that she would serve the food to everyone and herself the last. She would not allow me to wash other people’s plates after eating, believing that I was going to be polluted by others’ saliva. Neither

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<sup>12</sup> It needs to be noted here that many girls in the villages where I did my fieldwork, do not use sanitary pad while menstruating. The main reason is because it is too expensive for them. In addition, many girls cannot afford to have underwear which is needed when wearing the pad. I noticed that they had only one or two underwear which will be used in special occasion (with their most beautiful clothes) and indeed used when they need to wear the pad/cloth.

her family members nor she would be in danger of being contaminated by the family members' saliva because they were from the same line (*gotra*) which often regarded as one's own person. Perhaps in her view I had a higher caste than them and therefore was at risk of being impure by contacting to their saliva.<sup>88</sup>

Lipi's and the merchant's family indeed do not represent every middle class-lower caste villager in West Bengal. However, it seems to me that most if not all of middle class family in the villages I encountered with applied the Brahmanical code of purity in their way of life. The practice would not be able to change their caste (*jati*) origin, at least in their generation. However, it uplifted their rank in the social hierarchy in the village. It is important to note again that both families have a better economic level than their neighbours. They however would not be able to climb up the social hierarchy without upholding Brahmanical value to their ways. In the case of the poor family, although they do not have sufficient mode and means to follow the Brahmanical lifestyle, their way of life in regard to food purity suggests that Brahmanical values play the role in every Hindu social level. It needs to be noted that the process of Sanskritisation operated among the lower caste group I studied is done in an incomplete form in which the villagers who are economically comfortable can follow the ways of the Brahmins more than the poorer.

## Conclusion

Sanskritisation, the process by which the local people reproduced the value of the upper caste groups, acknowledges that the reaction of the marginalised groups to the Brahmanical yet dominant culture can also be done in an acceptant form. Accordingly, Dumont's Oriental depiction of Hindu caste which believed to be

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<sup>13</sup> I am not certain if I was placed in a higher caste because of my caste (which I told them I did not have) or my financial patronage to the family.

limited solely for high caste and class groups has been re-made by the local villagers who are usually excluded from that depictions. In fact, the Orientalisation of the real Orientals has its impact on the grassroots villagers. Therefore, the Brahmanical lifestyle depicted in the texts is not only an imagination of the elites and of the West as claimed by some postcolonial scholars. It appears that being able to follow the Oriental and Brahmanical values provides prides to the lower caste followers, even though some of those values are alien to them. In addition, the movement done by the lower caste and the Dalit groups does not always to resist the normative practice, as we shall see in this paper the way the rural villagers react to the normative value is to accept them into their daily living.

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